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10-27-2004

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Panel: Writing and Politics

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Recommended Citation

Joshi, Ammaraj, "Is Writing Different from Politics?" (2004). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 643.

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Is Writing Different from Politics?

Ammaraj Joshi

As an art form, writing immerses writers (and all human beings at some point) into the world that is beautiful, from which they can emerge afresh: like a blossom from the bud, like a child from the womb, like a mother after childbirth, like the sun or moon in the dark sky, like the land after the rain, like a hunter after a successful hunt, like an addict after an opium dose—filled up with feelings of pleasure or pain, happiness or sadness, exhilaration or dullness, excitement or boredom or the myriad other forms of experience of which the human body and mind are capable. And these experiences are primarily personal to the writer. But writing as a work of art endures only if these feelings evoked by the work of art – writing for that matter--cease to be only personal and become both personal and universal at the same time. Once the writer's personal experiences become public/ universal, the writer's experiences of pain and pleasure, happiness and sadness, life and death, excitement and boredom become public and the audience or the readers do have a greater opportunity to share these experiences with the writer. The audience speaks the voice of the writer and shares the sensation he or she has evoked. The reader moans when the writer has an ache, the reader sighs when the writer is tired, and the reader swishes when the writer is excited. Isn't this politics? What do we call it if it is not?

Rama Chandra in *The Ramayana* renounces Sita for a crime she has not committed and as a result the people who love him dearly denounce him as being mean and shortsighted; this mythical Rama has been perennially caught in the net of that flaw ever since. Duryodhana, in *The Mahabharata*, orders his brother to undress and defame Draupadi on the fourth day of her menstruation in the Royal gallery. A sense of hatred springs against him and this hatred toward the insane acts of an over indulged son remains an unforgettable anecdote of Hindu myth. Oedipus's knowledge of the sinful act that he unknowingly committed and the consequence of his knowledge still shakes us; Agamemnon's demand of Achilles' booty still reminds us of a potentate's unquenchable thirst for power. Shakespeare's "to be or not be" has become our destiny; Wordsworth's "Until, the breath of the corporeal frame/ And even the motion of our human blood/ Almost suspended, we are laid asleep/ In body and become a living soul" still reminds us of the impact of "Nature" on our being in the world while Keats' "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,-- that is all/ ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" still helps us decode the grammar of life and art, beauty and truth, temporality and permanence. Raskolnikov's deep division between his urge to repent and his conviction that the self needs to be fully expressed speaks of a split person; Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death/ He kindly stopped for me" will always speak for all of us; Sethe's painful acceptance of sex in order to get BELOVED carved on the tombstone will always remain everybody's pain, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" is the dream of everyone in every part of the world.

But what is the relation of writing to politics? It is mire into which the organizers have lured me to dive. Watch out! I may disappear in it. As a writer, still hesitant to make loud pronouncements despite over a decade's devotion, I enjoy writing whatever my heart feels and urges me to express in words, and I know I will never be able to answer this question. I may sink into it and disappear. Let me have that pleasure too. I enjoy the

opportunity the organizers have given me to make an effort to see this relation, or at least to stumble.

Oscar Wilde says “The artist is the creator of beautiful things,” and there is no point in disagreeing with him. A creative writer too, as an artist using words for his expressions, creates beautiful things. But what gives the writer an impetus to write and what provides the raw material to create those beautiful things? Kant believes in the existence of the “manifold of sensation” which, for him, is the raw material that the human mind processes through the creative power of sensibility perceived in the form of space and time. He compares the manifold of sensation to spectacles which we cannot do away with. He also postulates the power of understanding that comes from and frames our experiences according to “categories”: unity, plurality, substance, etc.

What interests me here, basically, is that we as writers do have the creative power of sensibility to understand the world through our experiences based on these categories, and we can create something beautiful or more sublime—all encompassing and universal in the Kantian sense—and can experience pleasure and pain, happiness and sadness and all other multifarious mutations of human experience.

Though Hegel will repent at art’s failure to achieve higher truth in our times due to our adherence to general points of view framed by laws, duties, rights and maxims, we cannot help this. We, as writers, live in the world and our experiences are human experiences based on “categories” and “points of view.” All these categories and points of view are, for that matter, political. Think of life and death, love and hate, pleasure and displeasure, happiness and suffering, comfort and discomfort, religion and culture, caste and color, gender and race, God, nature and man, colonization and hegemony, democracy and autocracy, terrorism and chauvinism and an unending list of things which frame the human constitution. The only thing that a writer can do is to make this human experience transcend the personal in order to embrace the universal, so that everyone can see their own mother in the hungry old woman searching for food for her emaciated baby in the burning and dry desert of Africa; so that every man gunned down by terrorists in the hilly terrains of Nepal can be seen as a universal victim of terror; so that the children killed in a school of Belsan can remind us of buds that died unblossomed; so that every woman on the street stands as a symbol of love, affection and beauty; and so that everything in this world reminds us of the wonderful artifact of the divine father.

I do begin with the local and individual in my writings, and I get pleasure in doing so. I think what is personal to me is personal to my readers too. And that is enough to make it political. Because a writer chooses to speak about an issue from a human constitution, he or she writes politics—in a way unlike the manner in which Bush speaks on terrorism and Maoists attack helpless civilians in Nepal—and that is my conviction.